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## “THE GLORIOUS FRUIT OF OUR LAND”: THE GREAT WAR IN PJ HARVEY’S *LET ENGLAND SHAKE*

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**Abstract:** *Let England Shake*, PJ Harvey’s 2011 concept album, and the homonymous short films collection directed by Seamus Murphy in collaboration with the singer, consist of a very contemporary example of war narrative. The album’s lyrics focus centrally – but not exclusively – on the First World War, especially on the Galipoli Campaign, while Murphy’s film approaches mainly the recent conflicts in the Middle East. This article focuses on evidencing how the image of war in *Let England Shake* is aesthetically constructed both in song and in imagery, supported by the theories of war literature – especially Samuel Hynes’s – and by debates on the (aesth) ethics of the representation of violence.

**Keywords:** War Narratives; First World War; Intermedia Studies; Song Studies.

**Resumo:** *Let England Shake*, álbum conceitual de PJ Harvey de 2001, e a coletânea de curta-metragens homônima dirigida por Seamus Murphy em colaboração com a cantora, consistem em um exemplo contemporâneo de narrativa de guerra. As letras do álbum se concentram principalmente – mas não exclusivamente – na Primeira Guerra Mundial, especialmente na campanha de Galipoli, enquanto o filme de Murphy aborda os recentes conflitos no Oriente Médio. Esse artigo evidencia como a imagem da guerra em *Let England Shake* é esteticamente construída tanto em canção quanto em imagens, apoiado pelas teorias de literatura de guerra – especialmente de Samuel Hynes – e por debates acerca da (est)ética da representação da violência.

**Palavras-chave:** Narrativas de guerra; Primeira Guerra Mundial; Estudos Intermídia; Estudos da Canção.

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More than a century has already passed since the First World War – or the Great War, as it was first called – established the “prototype of modern wars” (FUSSELL, 1991, p. 29) in 1914. At the dawn of the 20th Century, the conflict brought a scale of death and destruction that was unknown to humanity at the time. Its impact greatly influenced art, philosophy, science and ideologies of the modern world.

But even a century after its start, the Great War still inspires several artists, scientists, historians, critics, journalists and scholars to offer their own views and perspectives of the conflict, inserting it in contemporaneity.

PJ Harvey’s 2011 concept album *Let England Shake* offers a rather interesting contemporary take on the horrors of the First World War. Released alongside a collection of short films by photographer Seamus Murphy, the intermedia work is a great example of how the myth of the First World War is being permanently constructed: reinforced or reshaped, emphasized or questioned, remembered or relived.

In this article, originally conceived as a short presentation for an event in commemoration of the Centenary of the First World War, I offer a somewhat broad exposition of Harvey’s and Murphy’s work, associating the songs’ lyrics and Murphy’s footage to theoretical contributions on the aesthetic representations of the Great War, especially Samuel Hynes’s notion of the “Myth of War” and Catherine Brosman’s “functions of war literature”. I also present a discussion on the topic of the (aesth) ethics of the representation of violence in order to investigate how images and words work together in Murphy’s short films.

## REPRESENTING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

“The west’s asleep / Let England shake”: These are the opening lines to PJ Harvey’s album *Let England Shake*. In a possible reference to the “calm before the storm” of the Belle Époque and the pre-war years, Harvey starts her work by presenting England’s fall from grace after the war: “England’s dancing days are done / Another day, Bobby, for you to come / Home and tell me indifference has won, won, won”. From the world’s greatest economy in the 19th Century, England transitioned into a state of decay after two World Wars in the first half of the 20th Century, while the United States rose as the leading power of the western world. This is the starting point for Harvey’s discussion of the complex themes of war, England and national identity.

Harvey’s album was released in 2011, alongside a collection of short films by photographer Seamus Murphy: one film for each song, twelve in total. The work is a concept album; that is, all songs revolve around the same theme – in this case, war and national identity (BRIDPORT, 2011).

*Let England Shake* was received by widespread critical acclaim. It received a maximum score in some of the most important reviews in popular music industry, such as *The Guardian*, *The Los Angeles Times* and *NME*. Metacritic, a website that offers an average rating based on a corpus of several mainstream reviewers, gave it a score of 86/100 and considered it a “universal acclaim”. It was also awarded the Mercury Prize for the best United Kingdom and Ireland album, against competition that included the prestigious singer Adele (EAMES, 2011).

The choice of discussing more collective and universal themes represented a shift from the singer’s previous work. Harvey has expressed her difficulty in addressing the complex themes she approaches on the album, especially a concern for not sounding like typical “protest music”:

I felt like something I hadn’t really done yet with my writing was to approach big, concrete issues such as one’s country, and conflict. Things which affect every one of us, every day of our lives. (...) I didn’t know if I could even approach it in a way that I could get that balance right, that would work without coming across as maybe rather pompous, or as if I was preaching, or some sort of chest preaching protest music. It’s very difficult to get right, and I didn’t think I could. For the first time I thought “let’s have a go”. I had always felt passionately about these things and yet hadn’t put my voice to that, to express it. This was the first time I tried to do that. (BRIDPORT, 2011)

When stating the difficulty in addressing what she calls “big, concrete issues”, Harvey is in fact – knowingly or not – following a tradition that has been rather prolific in writings about war: the classic rhetorical trope of “adynation”, described by Kate McLoughlin as “the impossibility of addressing oneself adequately to the topic” (2009, p. 15), a tendency which, still according to the author, can be perceived on a range of authors, such as Homer and Shakespeare.

Similar concerns abound in contemporary war literature. The American novelist Bobbie Ann Mason has expressed a great apprehension in representing Vietnam War veterans in her homefront war novel *In Country*: “I have to confess”, she claimed, “that when I began writing the novel I was afraid of the subject. I didn’t know how to confront the huge subject of the Vietnam War and its aftermath.” (MASON, 2005, p. 250).

But even though the rhetoric of the irrepresentability of war abounds in its aesthetic representations, that fact is: war is represented. Dozens of new war narratives are published every year, regardless of how supposedly impossible it is to represent war. What requires investigation, then, is what strategies are found by different authors to try to contain the catastrophic event of war within an aesthetic representation.

For PJ Harvey, the solution for that challenge was, in her words, “an enormous amount of research”; by looking into other representations of war – not only in art, but also in philosophy and history – the singer was able to convey her perspectives on the aforementioned “big, concrete issues” that she wanted to thematize in her album. Harvey described the research process for writing the songs in *Let England Shake* as such:

I did an enormous amount of research (...). I read lots of books on war from all different eras. I read about war in a philosophical way, I read about it from all angles. I did lots of research on English history. I looked at the way other artists have spoken about England. I did a lot of internet research; I watched lots and lots of documentaries with interviews of people who had actually been there. Interviews with WWI soldiers right up to present day interviews with Afghani people to produce the broad spectrum. (...) I looked at lots of artwork, lots of painting, for

instance Salvador Dali's Spanish Civil War era and Goya's "Disasters of War" series. (...) The whole time I was writing trying to get the voice right, and I suppose what I kept coming back to, was that the place I did feel qualified to speak from was a very simple, human, emotional point of view, because we are all human. We all feel these things, or you can feel how it would have been for somebody in that situation. You know how much your heart can break after watching a documentary about somebody else's misfortune, a soldier who has been in these terrible situations, or a man who has lost his wife – blown up by a suicide bomber, and you feel. It's very human. (BRIDPORT, 2011)

The main strategy found by Harvey, then, is **intertextuality**: by establishing a dialogue with tradition, the songwriter is able to offer her own representation of the conflict based on previous depictions by other artists. But Harvey is not the only artist who relies on intertextuality to construct the landscape of her work; in fact, Margot Norris defines war writing as an "inevitably intertexted process":

At the same time, war writing is an inevitably intertexted process, obliged to contend with its own tradition of genres and conventions in the spirit of debt, opposition, or subversion even as it is haunted by the betrayals and inadequacies of its predecessors. The soldiers of Stephen Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* mentally carry Homer's *Iliad* into the Civil War with them (...). (NORRIS, 2000, p. 24)

But intertextuality, in Harvey's songs, is not limited to literary references: as mentioned above, she relies on documentaries, paintings, interviews and several other media in order to draw her picture of the war. Not only that, Harvey also establishes a dialogue with other pop musicians of the past, especially through sampling – the introduction of short extracts of audio tracks into another work – and quoting – the direct reference to the lyrics of a song in another song. This is evident, for instance, in the end of the track "The Words That Maketh Murder", in which Harvey sings "What if I take my problem to the United Nations", a direct reference to Eddie Cochran's classic rock'n'roll song "Summertime Blues". In one of the last tracks of *Let England Shake*, "Written on the Forehead", Harvey repeatedly samples an excerpt of Niney the Observer's reggae "Blood and Fire".

While it is quite clear that intertextuality is Harvey's central strategy in approaching war, the way war is represented must be addressed as well. Throughout the album, war is often represented somewhat vaguely, by using images which could fit several different conflicts in the 20th Century. One example of this tendency is the opening lines of "The Words That Maketh Murder": "I've seen and done things I want to forget / I've seen soldiers fall like lumps of meat / Blown and shot out beyond belief / Arms and legs were in the trees".

But there are some moments in the album in which the First World War can be identified as the conflict that is being centrally discussed. The main key of reading that allows for this realization is **toponymy** – that is, the naming of places. Some landmarks of the conflict are nominally cited throughout the songs, enabling a comprehension of the album's concept. One such example is in the track "The Colour of the Earth": "Louis was my dearest

friend / Fighting in the Anzac Trench”. The “Anzac trench”, here, most probably refers to the landing at Anzac Cove, on April 1915, by the forces of the British Empire – especially the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). Another example can be found in the title of the song “Battleship Hill”, which refers directly to a high ground held by the Ottomans, constantly shelled by allied warships positioned in the aforementioned Anzac Cove (NEW ZEALAND HISTORY). In “All and Everyone”, Harvey sings the terrifying lines “Death was everywhere / It was in the air / And in the sound / Coming off the mounds / Of Bolton’s Ridge” – here, there is another nominal reference to a landmark of the conflict, Bolton’s Ridge, also in the vicinity of Anzac Cove.

Toponymy, however, is not the only key to identify the First World War as the conflict thematized in *Let England Shake*. Harvey’s lyrics also hint at geographical and cultural elements which are associated to the conflict. The aforementioned “Written on the Forehead” features in its opening line “People throwing dinars at the belly dancers” the reference to “dinars”, a currency used in several Arab countries. In “Hanging in the Wire”, Harvey mentions the famous “no man’s land” (“Walker sees the mist rise / Over no man’s land”), the neutral zone that delimited the space between two opposing trenches.

A very interesting realization that emerges from the analysis of the excerpts exposed in the two previous paragraphs is the fact that what is being represented in the album is not simply the First World War. By nominally mentioning the Anzac cove, Bolton’s Ridge, and Battleship Hill, Harvey seems to be constantly addressing a specific moment of the war – the Landing at Anzac Cove, a part of the Gallipoli Campaign, in a region which today belongs to Turkey. Harvey, then, discusses in the album a part of the Middle Eastern theater of the war.

Having established the First World War – and more specifically, the Gallipoli Campaign – as the conflict being represented in *Let England Shake*, the investigation then turns to how the war is represented: which aspects are highlighted, and which are omitted, and what is the overall notion of the conflict that the album offers.

Samuel Hynes, when discussing war narratives, developed a very useful category: “the myth of the war”, a name by which he refers to the “commonsensical” narrative of a war, constructed by the multiple narratives that arise from it. In his book on the First World War, *A War Imagined*, Hynes defines the category:

I use that phrase [Myth of the War] in this book to mean not a falsification of reality, but an imaginative version of it, the story of the war that has evolved and has come to be accepted as true. The construction of that story began during the war, and grew in the years that followed, assimilating along the way what was compatible with its judgments, and rejecting what was not. The Myth is not the War entire: it is a tale that confirms a set of attitudes, an idea of what the war was and what it meant. (...)

This story [the Myth of the First World War] has been told in many ways: in histories of the war, in fictions and memoirs, in poems, in plays, in paintings, in films; but its essential elements remain much the same. (HYNES, 2011, 72-83)<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The edition of *A War Imagined* referenced in this article is the Kindle e-book version. Since there is no standard as of today for in-text citations for Kindle files, whenever citing an excerpt of a work from Kindle I use the contraction “loc.”.



Hynes, then, based on this central concept of “the myth of war”, attempts to offer his take on what the “myth of the First World War” would be, based on several different narratives of that conflict. According to the author, the myth of the Great War could be summarized as such:

(...) a generation of innocent young men, their heads full of high abstractions like Honour, Glory and England, went off to war to make the world safe for democracy. They were slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals. Those who survived were shocked, disillusioned and embittered by their war experiences, and saw that their real enemies were not the Germans, but the old men at home who had lied to them. They rejected the values of the society that had sent them to war, and in doing so separated their own generation from the past and from their cultural inheritance. (HYNES, 2011, 72)

This generalized narrative of the war – the “Myth of the Great War” – can be seen in several different narratives and depictions of the conflict. PJ Harvey, in *Let England Shake*, does not stray too far from this version, and elements of this myth can be identified in tracks of the album. The frustration with the “high abstractions like Honour, Glory and England”, the rejection of traditional values, and the embitterment of the war experience are especially present. In the track “England”, a tone of frustrated patriotism can be observed: “I live and die/ Through England / It leaves a sadness” are the song’s opening lines, which might be read as the voice of a soldier who lives and dies through England – the choice of words here is rather interesting, since the poetic voice does not claim to die **for** England, as a patriot would be expected to do, but rather **through** it; England seems to be the means of his death, and not the cause for which he dies. The song goes on: “Withered vine reaching from the country / That I love / England / You leave a taste / A bitter one”. The country is associated with a withered vine – coherent with the image of English decay throughout the album. Although the soldier admits his love for England, he has to emphasize that it leaves a taste: “a bitter one”. The “embitterment” of the war experience is quite literal in this verse.

A somewhat ironic take on the symbols of “Englishness” is offered in “The Last Living Rose”. The song opens with the lines “Goddamn Europeans! / Take me back to beautiful England”. This verse first sets England apart from the rest of Europe, and seems to place the responsibility of war on the shoulders of the “goddamn Europeans”, while pleading to return to England. The voice, once again, seems to be that of a soldier. But after these two opening lines, the poetic voice starts to draw a picture of England which differs from the patriotic descriptions usually associated to the country:

(...) the grey damp filthiness of ages  
And battered books  
And fog rolling down behind the mountains  
On the graveyards and dead sea-captains

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for location, followed by the digital location in which the excerpt is indexed in the file.

Let me walk through the stinking alleys  
To the music of drunken beatings  
Past the Thames river glistening  
Like gold hastily sold  
For nothing (HARVEY, 2011)

The words associated to England are eminently negative: “grey damp filthiness of ages”, “stinking alleys”, “music of drunken beatings”. Even the glistening of the River Thames – one of the greatest symbols of the city of London – is associated to questionable practices: “Like gold hastily sold / For nothing”, possibly a reference to British imperialism or to corruption within the country’s government.

An aspect of the myth that is particularly recurrent is the generalized slaughter of the soldiers; as Hynes puts it in the excerpt previously cited, the soldiers, in these narratives, are “slaughtered in stupid battles planned by stupid generals”. The proliferation of graphic descriptions of death and gore, and the images of trauma and desperation spawned out the horrors of war abound in Harvey’s lyrics. The soldier’s loneliness and desperation can be noticed in the following lines of “The Words that Maketh Murder”: “I’ve seen and done things I want to forget / Coming from an unearthly place / Longing to see a woman’s face”. A recurrent image of soldiers in wars is noticeable in these lines: the longing for wives and mothers. This is also present in another song, “The Colour of the Earth”, which offers a deeply emotional description of a soldier witnessing the death of his friend: “Louis ran forward from the line / And I never saw him again. / Later in the dark / I thought I heard Louis’ voice / Calling for his mother, then me / But I couldn’t get to him”. These lines also offer another aspect which is present in other war narratives: when the poetic voice claims that “Later in the dark” he **thought** he heard his friend’s voice, there is an uncertainty implied. By saying that he thinks he heard it, he puts his own narrative under questioning: did he really hear it? Was he hallucinating? This seemingly “unreality” of the narrative – or the “unreliability” of the testimony – is discussed by the Vietnam War writer Tim O’Brien in his short story “How to tell a true war story”:

In any war story, especially a true one, it’s difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen. What seems to happen becomes its own happening and has to be told that way. (...) The pictures get jumbled, you tend to miss a lot. And then afterward, when you go to tell about it, there is always that surreal seemingness, which makes the story seem untrue, but which in fact represents the hard and exact truth as it *seemed*. (O’BRIEN, 2009, p. 68)

Not only loneliness and trauma are recurrent in Harvey’s lyrics: descriptions of gore and violence abound in the songs as well. One of the best examples is the track “All and Everyone”. The song’s tone is clearly defined by its opening lines (“Death was everywhere / in the air / and in the sounds”) and in the lines which name the song (“as we advanced into the sun / death was all and everyone”). But it is in the last stanza of the song that the most graphic descriptions of death appear:

Death hung in the smoke and clung  
to 400 acres of useless beachfront  
A bank of red earth, dripping down  
Death is now, and now, and now  
(...)  
Death was in the staring sun  
Fixing its eyes on everyone  
It rattled the bones of the Light Horsemen  
Still lying out there in the open (HARVEY, 2011)

The gory and violent tone of “All and Everyone” appears in other songs. “The Words That Maketh Murder”, which was already discussed, is a good example. Its opening lines say: “I’ve seen and done things I want to forget / I’ve seen soldier fall like lumps of meat / Blown and shot out beyond belief / Arms and legs were in the trees”. The images cannot be defined as anything other than “gory”: soldiers are “lumps of meat”, who after being blown “beyond belief” – possibly a reference to landmines – wound up with their “arms and legs in the trees”. Images of putrefaction are also prolific in the lyrics: “Death lingering, stunk / Flies swarming everyone / Over the whole summit peak / Flesh quivering in the heat”.

The song “Hanging in the Wire” portrays the death of a soldier – Walker – who dies entangled in a wire in No Man’s Land; while approaching death, he starts to remember England and its landscapes, while waiting to be shot by the enemies. The lyrics feature both elements of violence and beauty in this depiction:

Walker’s in the wire  
Limbs point upwards  
There are no birds singing  
The white cliffs of Dover  
There are no trees to sing from  
Walker cannot hear the wind  
Far off symphony  
To hear the guns beginning

Walker’s in the mist  
Rising over no man’s land  
In the battered waste ground  
Hear the guns firing (HARVEY, 2011)

This tendency of representing violence and gore indicates a stance towards the conflict itself: by describing violent deaths and a general frustration towards war, Harvey provides an anti-war discourse, aimed at denouncing the horrors that it brings. This strategy appears in different narratives. Catherine Brosman (1992), in her article “The Functions of War Literature”, associates this tendency to what she calls the “social function” of war literature, a function which is displayed in works that attempt to “demystify war and the



military, with its linguistic, behavioral, and other codes, and to support pacifism” (1992, p. 89). Discussing this function, the author claims that:

Insisting lengthily upon the gore, the fear, the terrible conditions of existence, the wanton destruction – as so many writers of World War I and the Vietnam conflict did – at the expense of the supposed rationale for war and its possibilities of value or redeeming features goes even farther than an objective tone to undercut the notions of heroism and legitimate national interest. (HARVEY, 2011)

The lyrics to Harvey’s songs in *Let England Shake* reveal a disillusioned view of the First World War, rich in violence and gore. However, the collection of short films by Seamus Murphy offers an interesting counter-balance to this tendency, and puts the topic of the ethics of the representation of violence at play.

### SEAMUS MURPHY’S SHORT FILMS AND THE (AEST)ETHICS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF VIOLENCE

Seamus Murphy is a British photographer, specialized in covering wars and war-torn countries. PJ Harvey invited him to work with her in *Let England Shake* after she saw his exhibition of Afghanistan photos, *A Darkness Visible* (SCHRODT). A curious aspect surrounding their work together is the fact that Murphy was not a filmmaker; he was a still photographer, and was initially invited to work with Harvey with album artwork, pictures for press and portraits. However, when he showed the singer the footage he took in Afghanistan for a personal project, they decided to make the short films which accompany each of the songs. (SCHRODT, 2011)

The videos are mostly comprised of scenes from England – both London and the countryside –, intertwined with footage of people reading the lyrics to the songs. There are also some scenes of Harvey and her band, and some still photographs from Murphy’s series on the Afghan War, *A Darkness Visible*. There is an overall minimalistic approach to the images, with only natural lights and no special effects whatsoever – which greatly sets Murphy’s work with Harvey apart from the tradition of music videos. Murphy himself explains his aesthetic choices for the project:

Naturalistic is absolutely the word. It’s not realism as such, although the situations are real. There’s no lighting whatsoever in any of the videos. I’ve used available light, which is the way I always work. And I didn’t want any effects whatsoever. I didn’t want any slow motion. There’s a couple of things where I’ve reversed the motion from forward or backward, but that’s a thing of convenience. (...) Nature is interesting enough. (...) there’s a shot in “The Glorious Land” where it’s literally just the clouds scuttling across the sky and covering the sun. It’s a landscape shot of a field with crops and a house at the end. It’s in sunshine, and then suddenly there’s a line that goes all the way through it. It’s almost like a wipe, like a black wipe. And

that's just out there. Anyone walking through the field is going to see it. Polly being who she is, and what she writes about in this album—it's a lot to do with the land, it's a lot to do with nature. Polly is from Dorset, in the countryside, so she's very connected with that, and I think to have her in some synthetic studio situation didn't seem like anything I would do, if given the choice. (SCHRODT, 2011)

What calls one's attention, then, is how a great contrast can be seen between the words being sung – sorrowful, violent, disillusioned – and the images being shown in the videos. In fact, very few scenes of the films show any representation of war – and when war is indeed represented, it is usually through indirect means. The most “graphic” or “literal” representation of war present in the films is in “Written on the Forehead”, in which Murphy inserts still photographs of the Afghan War from his *A Darkness Visible* series.

Another interesting aesthetic choice taken by Murphy can be seen in the short film for “In the Dark Places”: at a certain point, Murphy films his own set of negatives from *A Darkness Visible*, providing a *mise-en-abyme* in which it's not war which is represented, but his own representation of war.

This kind of *mise-en-abyme* can once again be seen in the short film for “Battleship Hill” in which the only depiction of an early modern war – probably the First or the Second World War – is presented in the films. Among several shots of old photographs and household objects, a particular picture is shown more than once: several soldiers in ceremonial clothes, posing for the camera, probably while on the rear echelon or at home.

Another short film featuring scenes related to war is “The Words that Maketh Murder”. In the film, a scene from a man in a military coat, carrying a rifle and walking alone on a green countryside environment is contrasted with a shot of several young men in ceremonial military clothes, carrying what seem to be diplomas. The scene of the lonely military man is displayed while the first line of the song is sung – “I've seen and done things I want to forget”; the following line, “I've seen soldiers fall like lumps of meat”, features a shot of a rear view mirror reflecting a corpse on the ground, possibly in Afghanistan. Finally, the two last verses of the first stanza, “Blown and shot out beyond belief / Arms and legs were in the trees” are played to the scene of the young men with their diplomas. This sequence of images – the lonely soldier, the dead man, the young military men –, along with the song's lyrics, seems to point to the inevitable tragedy of war, as if the loneliness of the veteran or the death of the man are somehow what the future stores for the young men carrying their diplomas. It should also be emphasized that the only scene that could be described as somewhat “violent” or “gory” – the dead man – is seen through a mirror, that is, in another *mise-en-abyme*.

But apart from these few examples cited here, war in general is mostly absent from the films of *Let England Shake*. When it is represented, it is indirectly – either as footage of a photo or of scenes of military men at home, for example. Other than that, Murphy's footage comprises basically scenes from England. The fact that the horror of war is described in the lyrics but not represented in the images – or represented indirectly – is linked to a very contemporary discussion: the (aest)ethics of representing violence. Some authors claim that the proliferation of images of violence in contemporary culture might lead to a desensitization of our perceptions. Baitello Jr. puts the question as such:

Maybe the hypertrophy of communication through image, and therefore of vision, associated with the abuse of the senses of distance, is producing a kind of violence against the integrity of one’s own body. Couldn’t it be questioned whether or not the dialogue between vision and proprioception could be valid the other way around, that is, if by having so many images, so much vision, wouldn’t we be little by little losing the feel of our own body, the space of the self? Wouldn’t it be the case to ask ourselves whether or not we are also creating, this way, an increasing difficulty of putting ourselves (and/or feeling ourselves) in the space and time which we fit in the world? This would involve the loss of the body itself, that is, the loss of the here and now. (BAITELLO JR., 1999: p. 83-84)<sup>3</sup>

The proliferation of images of violence, then, as Baitello Jr. mentions, could lead to a losing of the self. Aware of the risks that the abuse of violent scenes might pose, several artists in the late 20th century attempted to offer alternatives to the representation of violence. The best example might be seen, perhaps, in Claude Lanzmann’s 9-hour-long documentary *Shoah* (1985). In it, the director tried to bypass the overall tendency of relying on shocking images of Auschwitz to represent the horrors of the Holocaust, and represents it only through interviews. There are no archive footage, no pictures of the concentration camps, no voice-over narratives. The viewer is offered only the survivor’s accounts, and from the discourse of these testifiers he or she must construct an image of the tragedy.

In *Let England Shake*, Murphy and Harvey seem to refer to a similar strategy: the horrors of war are evoked by the song’s lyrics, but are not represented in its images. Rather, the juxtaposition of English scenery with the lyrics about the war create a somewhat sarcastic questioning of the notions of “patriotism” and “Englishness” that are, in the end, much more poignant and effective than the mere proliferation of violent images.

By “telling” rather than “showing”, the singer and the photographer manage to offer a depiction of the war that, while still adhering to the canonical elements of the “myth of the war”, as proposed by Hynes, manage to do so while keeping a strict ethics code of representation that does not resort to gratuitous violence in order to accomplish the role of denouncing the horrors of war.

The intermedia project conducted by Harvey and Murphy evidence how the First World War is still an event that shapes contemporary art and culture, even a century later. Its myth is constantly being shaped – reinforced or questioned – through different perspectives that try to shed different lights on the event. *Let England Shake* provides one of such perspectives, and excels at it, by offering a solid, ethical and rich work of art that stretches through the realms of music, literature, photography and cinema.

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3 “Talvez a hipertrofia da comunicação pelas imagens, portanto da visão, aliada ao abuso dos sentidos de distância, esteja produzindo um tipo de violência contra a integridade do próprio corpo. Não se poderia indagar se o diálogo entre a visão e a propriocepção não seria também válido na outra direção, ou seja, com tantas imagens, tanta visão, não estaríamos perdendo aos poucos a sensação do próprio corpo, o espaço do eu? Não seria o caso de nos perguntarmos se não estamos também gerando, com isto, uma dificuldade crescente de nos colocarmos (e/ou nos sentirmos) no espaço e no tempo que nos cabem no mundo? Isto envolveria a perda do próprio corpo, quer dizer, a perda do aqui e do agora.” (BAITELLO JR., 1999)

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